The Aftermath of Violence: Victim Offender Dialogue, Forgiveness Processes, and Other Paths to Healing

Janet Melcher, Ph.D.
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio

Statement of the Research Problem

The way to this dissertation started with my interest in the research on forgiveness as a helping intervention. Available research on psychotherapeutic forgiveness intervention models indicates that forgiveness has clear mental health benefits in situations where unfairness has occurred (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Freedman, Enright, & Knutson, 2005; Lin, Mack, Enright, Krahn, & Baskin, 2004; Worthington, 2006). In addition, I became interested in the reports of healing outcomes that result from restorative justice procedures where the victim and convicted offender meet (Angel, 2005; Strang, 2002; Umbreit & Vos, 2000; Umbreit, Vos, Coates, & Brown, 2003). The in-person meetings give the victim and the offender an opportunity to tell their experience of the crime and in some cases a restitution agreement is pursued Even though forgiveness is not a specified objective of restorative justice encounters (Umbreit, Vos, Coates, & Brown, 2003; VanNess & Strong, 2002; Zehr, 2002), existing information shows that the subject of forgiveness frequently surfaces during restorative justice proceedings (Armour & Umbreit, 2005; Braithewaite, 1995; Umbreit & Vos, 2000; Umbreit, Vos, Coates, & Brown, 2003; VanNess & Strong, 2002). Some say the restorative justice process and meeting provides a structure that naturally fosters a forgiveness outcome (Armour & Umbreit, 2005; McCullough, 2008). One might assume that naturally occurring forgiveness, that is, forgiveness that takes place without a psychotherapeutic intervention, would also have a beneficial impact on the victim's wellbeing. Armour and Umbreit (2005) highlighted the many questions that remained about forgiveness and restorative justice practices such as: 1) do more forgiving victims tend to request restorative justice, 2) what about the process supported or lessened the likelihood of a forgiveness outcome, and 3) what are the long term consequences for those who forgave vs. those who did not? To sum up, more in depth information was needed about the elements involved in the healing outcomes for victims who participate in the restorative justice process.

Background and Research Question

My research was designed to learn about what is helpful when the death of a loved one occurs as a result of homicide. Those affected by the loss of a loved one due to

homicide will be called survivors. In some states such as Ohio, victims/survivors have the option of requesting a restorative justice meeting with the offender in violent crime cases so they may ask for missing pieces of information about the crime, tell the offender about the impact of the crime, or address other matters that might be important to those particular individuals (Borton, 2008; Umbreit & Vos, 2000; Umbreit, Vos, Coates, & Brown, 2003). Of particular interest in this study was the survivor's decision to use or not to use Ohio's restorative justice program known as Victim Offender Dialogue (VOD), a carefully structured procedure that allows the survivor to have a planned in-person conversation with the convicted offender for the purpose of asking questions and sharing information about the death of the loved one. The topic of forgiveness and how forgiveness relates to making use of VOD (8 participants) or not making use of VOD (7 participants) was a major focus of the study. The primary research question that guided the study was, "What elements, that is, what experiences or viewpoints are associated with the most optimal outcomes for these survivors of homicide?"

Research Methods

To address the research question in a manner that brought the depth and detail of the survivors' experiences forward, a qualitative study (Padgett, 1998) based on a social constructionist orientation (Gergen, 1999; Gergen, 2009) using narrative interpretation methods (Riessman, 2008) was conducted. To qualify for the study, the offender in the case had to be convicted and incarcerated in an Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) facility so all participants were eligible for VOD. Participants included eight (8) female survivors from different regions in Ohio who had participated in at least one in-person VOD with the convicted offender. The ODRC Office of Victim Services sent letters to all eligible survivors with known addresses (29) inviting them to participate. A statewide effort was launched to recruit participants who did not go through a VOD by contacting support groups such as Parents of Murdered Children. Seven (7) female survivors who did not participate in a VOD agreed to take part in the study. All participants with no VOD were from the southwest region of Ohio. To triangulate the data, six (6) ODRC VOD facilitators were also interviewed and the ODRC VOD records were reviewed for the VOD participants. Ken Czillenger, one of the founders of Parents of Murdered Children, agreed to an interview as a key informant for the study. In person audio-recorded interviews and phone follow-up interviews were conducted with all participants. All in-person interviews took place in the period from January through July 2011. Follow-up phone contacts took place from April through September 2012.

Table 1 Description of Study Participants

Study Participants			
8 VOD Survivors	**7 Support Group Survivors**	**6 VOD Facilitators**	**Ken Czillenger, POMC Co-Founder**
Ages: 30's – 60's	**Ages**: 30's to 70's		
Education: High School to Master's Degree	**Education:** High School to Beyond Bachelor's Degree		
Years Since Death: 5-9 years ago = 1 10 – 15 years ago = 4 20-25 years ago = 2 30-35 years ago = 1	**Years Since Death:** 5 or less years = 2 6 to 10 years = 3 30-35 years = 1 (Two survivors linked to one death)		
White: 6 African-American: 2	Mixed Ethnicity: 1 White: 4 African American: 2		

Summary of Results

Although the absence of the lost loved one remains prominent in the daily experience for most survivors in the study, many also report a return to day-to-day good emotional functioning. Differences in the approaches to healing were observed between the two survivor groups. I will begin with a description of the VOD participants' experiences.

Many who pursued VOD were powerfully drawn to speak to the offender and many actively pursued dialogues on their own without the assistance of a helping professional. VOD participant responses ranged from long term depression and disruption to full forgiveness and reported daily good emotional functioning. Depression was associated with a strong focus on the unfairness of the homicide and determination to use the criminal justice system for retribution. Seven of the eight VOD survivors reported good day-to-day emotional functioning. Positive daily emotional functioning was associated with expressing an understanding of the offender's circumstances (7 survivors), empathy for the offender (6 survivors), refusing to be negative (6 survivors), forgiveness (5 survivors), positive religious coping (3 survivors), and volunteer work related to the crime (3 survivors). To clarify, positive religious coping involves calling upon one's faith or faith community as a source of support rather than feeling that the crime was the result of a higher power abandoning or punishing the survivor (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998).

Five of the VOD survivors stated that they forgave the offender. Four of the VOD survivors had either forgiven or were in the process of forgiving before the in-person VOD meeting took place and one survivor reported spontaneous forgiveness that occurred as a result of the VOD meeting. In all cases where the survivors either forgave or were in the process of forgiving prior to the VOD, forgiveness was maintained and often strengthened after the VOD, even though in one case the offender continued to deny responsibility for the death. The survivor anticipated that this would happen.

The spontaneous, unexpected forgiveness reveals information about the process involved in healing that some report. The survivor who experienced unexpected forgiveness explained that she had lived with debilitating anger related to the loss of her loved one for many years. She went into the VOD "with all of the hate in the world" and when she came out she was "whole." She says this happened in an instant. By the time she got home she realized that she had forgiven the offender. During the in-person VOD meeting, the offender was respectful, told what the survivor believed to be a truthful account of the heinous crime he committed, and apologized. The survivor reported that meeting with the offender changed the way she thought of him. In her mind, the offender was no longer just a murderer. He became a human being. Following the VOD, this survivor's mental health status changed from the days of having intense anger prior to the VOD to a sense of peace after the VOD.

Another survivor who says she did not forgive also credits the VOD with her healing. Her strong impulse to seek revenged changed quickly after meeting with the young remorseful offender who was forthright about the harm he caused. She credits VOD 100% with allowing her to move from negativity to healing.

What accounts for this dramatic change? One of the well researched psychotherapeutic forgiveness intervention models, *The Process Model of Forgiveness* (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000), may hold some clues. The Process Model includes a segment called *reframing* where the client is asked to go through a cognitive process devoted to trying to understand the offender. For example, the client may be asked to imagine the offender's childhood or to think about what was happening in the offender's life at the time of the offense. This exercise encourages the client to see the offender as a person and not just a malevolent entity. After this step, the client is asked to work on empathy for the offender by imagining how the offender might feel. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) claim that when the client experiences empathy for the offender, compassion for the offender comes about automatically and somewhat mysteriously. The VOD exchanges have built in opportunities for allowing the survivor to understand more about the offender's circumstances. The likelihood that empathy will be evoked is heightened by the face-to-face arrangement (Hoffman, 2000), and may be especially likely to occur if the offender is genuinely contrite and able to take responsibility for the harm that he perpetrated (Armour & Umbreit, 2005; McCullough, 2008).

All survivors who forgave were clear that the offender needed to be held accountable for the unacceptable crime and that appropriate consequences should be imposed. The stories of VOD survivors who had positive emotional outcomes, both those who forgave and those who did not forgive, did not emphasize punishing the offender. In fact, a few of the survivors became actively involved in helping with the

rehabilitation through a carefully planned exchange of letters after the in-person meeting. The survivors with the better emotional outcomes based their decision about whether to oppose parole upon their belief about the offender's potential for more harmful behavior. If the offender was thought to present a continued danger, the survivors were going to make their opposition to parole known. In the instance where the VOD survivor was determined to continue to punish the offender, long-term ongoing depression was reported.

All of the survivors who did not go through VOD, the Support Group survivors, were actively involved in volunteer work related to crime prevention and/or supporting other victims. All found the volunteer work to be an important factor in helping with the day-to-day continued existence after the homicide. All of these participants made remarkable contributions through their volunteer efforts. Four of the seven Support Group survivors reported good day-to-day emotional functioning. For these Support Group survivors, the positive outcomes are associated with a refusal to be negative (1 survivor), positive religious coping (3 survivors), and volunteer work focused on trying to make something worthwhile come out of the tragic loss (4 survivors). The religious coping and refusal to be negative appeared to ameliorate the intensity of troubling emotions such as anger and depression.

Again, none of these Support Group survivors said they forgave the offender. They viewed forgiveness as overlooking the offense in some way. These survivors know about VOD and a few have inquired about meeting with the offender. Some (4 survivors) were very clear that they would not want to meet with the offender.

Table 2 Elements Associated with Positive Emotional Outcomes

Elements Associated with Positive Emotional Outcomes			
For VOD Survivors (7 out of 8 VOD Survivors reported Positive Emotional Outcomes)	**# of VOD Survivors**	**For Support Group Survivors (4 out of 7 reported Positive Emotional Outcomes)**	**# of Support Group Survivors**
Understanding of O's Circumstances	7	Understanding of O's Circumstances	0
Empathy for O	6	Empathy for O	0
Refuses to be Negative	6	Refuses to be Negative	1
Forgives O	5	Forgives O	0
Positive Religious Coping	3	Positive Religious Coping	3
Volunteer Work	3	Volunteer Work	4

The *Refusal to be Negative* element deserves a fuller explanation. Six of the VOD participants who reported positive emotional outcomes mentioned a refusal to be negative in some form. Four of these mentions came from the participants who forgave before the VOD and two came from VOD participants who did not forgive. One Support

Group survivor with a good emotional outcome mentioned only volunteer work and her intention to keep moving in a hopeful direction. Psychologist and forgiveness researcher, Everett Worthington (2006) makes a case for relying upon emotional replacement when working toward forgiveness. In the case of forgiveness, he recommends replacing unforgiving thoughts about the offender with thoughts of compassion and similar emotions. Fredrickson's (2001) *Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions* informed Worthington's approach. Fredrickson believes that it's important to bring attention to positive emotions and that focusing on the more positive emotions provides a way to cope with negative emotion and enhance overall well being. Both the VOD participants and at least one Support Group participant seemed to naturally help themselves with their refusal to allow the offender to essentially take their lives as he had taken the life of the loved one. They were determined to find something positive and hopeful in the bleak situation. Forgiveness was not necessary for this helpful attitude to prevail. Those who reported more negative emotional functioning remained more prominently fixed upon the injustice that the offender committed.

Utility for Social Work Practice

Many of the VOD survivors reported that family members or friends discouraged them from talking with the offender. Similarly, survivors got feedback from others indicating that their forgiveness response was perceived as a betrayal or a foolish choice. Since evidence points to the beneficial outcomes, social workers can support those who choose restorative justice interventions and forgiveness. The stories of these survivors can be used when co-constructing a life sustaining narrative in the course of narrative therapy exchanges (Paquin, 2009). The experiences of these survivors also highlight how productive forgiveness and/or maintaining a hopeful emotional stance can be. This suggests that the Process Model of Forgiveness (Enright and Fitzgibbons, 2000) and Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden-and-Build approaches can be helpful in cases where unfairness has occurred. Also, on the larger systems level, the VOD survivors' experiences suggest that public policy should endorse restorative justice procedures.

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